

The Dinner
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Paul Lohman, *The Dinner's* narrator, invokes Leo Tolstoy's famous opening lines from *Anna Karenina*: "All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." Paul is obsessed with the question of whether or not his nuclear family is happy, yet his retelling of the events that take place the night of the dinner with his wife, Claire, his brother, Serge, and Serge's wife, Babette, more than suggest, nay, confirm that this is a profoundly disturbed family. Despite the horrifying issues that reveal themselves in the course of the novel, Paul's family rights itself by the end of the book, with full knowledge of their depravity, disproving Tolstoy's assertion that all happy families are alike. This family's ability to be happy despite the fact that one person is a violent maniac, another is just fine destroying her brother-in-law's face with a broken wine glass, and the third is a murderer surely must be unusual.

The Dinner takes place in Amsterdam over the course of an evening's dinner between two brothers and their wives at an expensive pretentious restaurant. The story unfolds in the first person, narrated by Paul, but it is his politician brother, Serge, who sets the agenda for the evening, which is to decide what to do about their sons, who have murdered a homeless woman as they attempted to withdraw money from an ATM. However, the reader doesn't know the true nature of the "problem" because this is a novel that rests on the disclosure of secrets. Indeed, we do not know that Paul and Serge are brothers until Paul and Claire enter the

restaurant and give their name to the hostess. For those of you who listened to the audio version of the book, you immediately know there is no love lost between Paul and Serge. From the very beginning, every time Paul says Serge's name, he draws the name out, dripping with disdain.

The backdrop of the restaurant and the food serves to reinforce the discomfort Paul has for his brother, the events they are there to discuss, and Paul's uncertainty about Claire's fealty, her relationship with their son, Michel, and what each of the four main characters knows about what is going on with their sons. The novel proceeds through the aperitif, appetizer, main course, dessert, and aperitif. Throughout the evening, as the manager describes each of the dishes and the food's provenance, pointing his pinky perilously close to the food, each of the diners has one sort of meltdown after another. At times, both Claire and Babette spend time in the garden, Paul leaves the table, and even Serge threatens to leave. At one point, Serge is left alone to devour his main course. As Paul continues with his narrative, he fills in various events in flashback, so while the dinner proceeds in linear fashion, what we as readers need to know is revealed through Paul's memory, colored by what is eventually revealed as a severe hereditary mental illness.

Because Paul is narrating, his illness is another organizing feature of the story. Is there a hereditary mental illness that manifests itself as agitation, rage, and violent behavior and is detectable through amniocentesis and can be the basis for elective abortion? I'm not a medical doctor, but this seems questionable. Yet, Paul learns about his illness when he is referred to a

psychologist after he gives a series of objectionable lessons at the high school where he teaches history. He has asked his students to figure out mathematically how many victims of the Holocaust, being (in his words) assholes, would thus have profitably been exterminated for the good of society. The reader learns about Paul's tendencies for violence through events that intensify through the novel: first as Paul needs to consciously control himself at the restaurant when at the mercy of the manager, when Michel breaks a window at a bike shop, when Paul threatens a neighbor who he suspects is grooming young neighborhood boys, when Paul's principal confronts him about his classroom behavior and Paul imagines beating him to a pulp, when Paul bashes Serge's head with a hot skillet, and finally, when Paul barehandedly pummels Michel's principal's face, landing the man in the hospital. Indeed it is through Michel's essay on capital punishment that we begin to wonder whether Michel is also afflicted with this illness. Michel's ideas about extrajudicially liquidating suspects who have been arrested for committing heinous crimes echoes Paul's ideas about Holocaust victims. Does Michel inherit his father's illness and his ideas about justifiable violence? Is Serge and Babette's son Rick, who shares at least half the gene pool, similarly saddled? Does this illness in any way excuse or mitigate anyone's behavior? Ironically, at the very end, Paul argues that Claire needs to be the one to prevent Serge from dropping out of the election because violent behavior on Paul's part could be explained away and would most likely not achieve their desired result, which is to keep Serge quiet about the boys and continue in the election.

The other puzzle in this story is about who knows what. Among the adults, Claire alone knows that Beau is blackmailing Michel and Rick. Michel confided in Claire immediately after the

murder, but Paul only finds out about his son's and nephew's involvement while watching video of the incident on the television news. It seems that only Paul knows about the beating at the subway station, an incident that doesn't seem to get developed. Yet it confirms for Paul that Michel is the instigator, even as Rick willingly plays along. It is unclear really how much Serge and Babette know, other than what happens at the ATM. Everyone's reactions are morally off the rails. Claire claims that her silence was meant to protect Paul. Serge is concerned about Rick's academic achievement. Babette wants to be the Prime Minister's wife. Paul seems to understand Michel's actions and knows that he will do his best to keep it quiet, mostly in the hopes of maintaining Michel's continuing love. The last line of the book, "Dear old Dad," confirms that his parental instincts were correct.

And yet, for me, the most surprising revelation was the degree to which Claire would go to any lengths to protect her son. Even in an age of the "mama bear," i.e. when a mama bear will do anything necessary to defend her cubs, Claire takes this to an extreme. Throughout the novel, Claire seems to be the most steady and dare I say, most normal? Claire reveals that she loves the "old" Paul, not the Paul on meds that tamp down his antisocial tendencies, rather the Paul who requires constant monitoring and can slide into violence at any provocation. Serge's referring to the boys' attack on the homeless woman as murder sets Claire off refuting the charge and blaming the victim. Why was this homeless woman at the ATM in the first place? Why did she smell so bad? How could the boys be expected to use the machine with her smelling so badly? Why should they have to go out of their way to find another machine? As if this stinky homeless person deserved to be tortured and burned to death. Claire sets up the

time of a fake phone call in order to provide an alibi for Michel, who is planning some unspecified remedy while Claire and Paul are at the restaurant. Claire advises Michel to “do whatever seems best.” Does this include killing Beau? We don’t know for sure, but in the end, Beau disappears never to be heard from again.

One of the challenges with *The Dinner*, is that every character is pretty unlikeable. At first, it is easy enough to commiserate with Paul. The restaurant is pretentious. I could only imagine the manager and his pinky finger looking and acting exactly like Mr. Bean. The food’s presentation on nearly empty plates adorned with three tiny lettuce leaves or sun-dried tomatoes from Bulgaria could only induce a few sympathetic eye-rolls. But, as Paul’s irritation with everything, especially his politician brother, mounts, the reader comes to realize that Paul is an unreliable narrator and a seriously damaged person. As the story rolls out, each of the characters becomes more and more problematic. Who do you root for? Serge, the politician who is ready to forego his political career to help his son confess? Babette, who like Claire, wants to silence her husband and be the Prime Minister’s wife? Paul, who would just as soon destroy almost anyone’s face? Claire, who advocates killing a nephew, to save her own son? What kind of resolution will satisfy? As it is, Koch leaves us to imagine the ending and none of the options are particularly good.